

*A Tantric Ode
to
Goddess Durga*

Ashish Marathe

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A childhood memory

When I'm among friends and family, I'm happier. When I'm alone, I'm wiser. - Ashish Marathe

Ever since I've begun understanding their importance, difficulties and times of despair have become my greatest teachers. They encouraged me to rid my life of all delusions. People whom I considered integral to my existence, things I longed for, ideas that I despised were all diversions meticulously crafted to swerve me away from my goal. As I moved away from the shell, I realized that answers to all difficulties lie in the basics. Even a deluge of pain can be defeated by remembering something as simple as a childhood memory.

My childhood was the best time of my life for reasons both obvious and unusual. With no one to steal away my parents' love, I was a prince in my own right with everything I needed and everything I wanted at my disposal. I had a perfect life which was about to be made better with something I am yet to fully comprehend - a touch of divinity.

One night, my brave father took up the extremely difficult task of putting me to sleep. When I demanded my favorite lullaby which my father didn't know (or any other lullaby for that matter), he somehow convinced me to listen to the only thing he could remember - verses from Durga Saptashati.

Durga Saptashati comprises of seven hundred verses authored by Sage Markandeya describing the victory of goddess Durga over demon Mahishasur. Traditionally, these verses are recited in a specific order along with several hymns and mantras. Those who know how, meditate on these verses to reach a higher state of consciousness.

My family has a tradition of worshipping the goddess. Like all my ancestors, my father was a Shakti Sadhak. When he was my age, my grandfather had initiated him just like he was initiating me. Through years of rigorous penance, he had amassed vast amount of spiritual energy. Many believed and I know that he had the ability to enliven any mantra, verse or hymn by merely reciting it. His recital of the verses of Durga Saptashati that night was no different.

There was a street lamp next to my room. Its golden yellow light, after being diffused through a ventilator right in front of me, was falling on the mosquito net hanging over my bed. The resonance of my father's deep, baritone voice completed the soothing ambience.

While the energy stored in form of my father's memory was rippling through the environment, another energy was playing the game of light and shadows on the mosquito net. Every moment something new was being created. Each words added a bit of detail to it and each verse made it a little clearer. Random lines took shape and irregularities became features. Everything I couldn't understand vanished into something very familiar.

Legs - it had four of them - strong and muscular, a massive torso, a long tail and a head held high; a formidable beast. What initially looked like a bull turned out to be a lion. I could clearly see his fiery eyes and sharp canines. He was pounding his paws and shaking his mane in an eerily slow motion.

Still more like a puff of smoke - glowing, gradually transforming, sometimes into something vague, sometimes into something recognizable - the lion contorted to make an addition to his back. A Sun like sphere expanded into a skewed triangle that curled into a rough female figure.

Her arms, all ten of them, didn't take long to reveal themselves. The silvery shine next to them formed the weapons she held in her hands. Her sari added a reddish hue to the environment. Like the afternoon Sun the brilliance of her crown and her earrings was making it virtually impossible for me to see her face.

I wanted to get closer, embrace her, talk to her, play with her and, if my father would allow it, ride her lion. After all, that's how you make someone your friend. I was sure that she had come to meet me and I had no intention of letting her go, ever (I didn't).

Suddenly, I could clearly see her. Extremely beautiful, she resembled my mother a lot. Mounted on a fierce lion, wielding various weapons in her ten hands, wearing a red sari and magnificent ornaments, right in front of me was goddess Durga.

I greeted her with a smile. She sweetly smiled back.

That was the moment when I fell asleep.

Doubt is a modern age malignity found in grownups. Children perceive everything with their unadulterated conscience which allows them access to divinity. I cherish my childhood. Whenever life makes me falter, I make it a point to go back to the child that I once was and reunite with him.

A 48 hour ritual

I'm not afraid of the storm. I'll eventually learn to sail through it. - Ashish Marathe

Nothing can be as simple and yet as complex as a perception. Instead of wisdom and intuitive insight, one's perception is often based on desires, motivated by greed and dominated by affluence. The drudgery of a preformatted life; based solely on hope and in anticipation of events, either imaginary or experienced by others, occurring in a certain order; forms hardened notions so deeply ingrained in one's psyche that repeated smashing of the person against reality becomes inevitable.

I've been stabbed in the back by the best of friends; I've seen the happiest of times become the source of my gravest pain; I've discovered wisdom where it was least expected; and I've found solace in the lap of my darkest fear. Therefore, I find it prudent not to be too rigid about anything.

My father spent most of his hard-earned money, which could have bought him a lot of much needed things, on friends and relatives, who should have prevented him from getting sucked into a whirlpool of anguish but didn't, and deprived himself of basic things like medicines, which do cure a lot of diseases, and means to maintain a respectable place, which he deserved, in society. Misery, for him, was like a multi-tentacled beast stuck to his side and it was going to be there until all of its tentacles are chopped off simultaneously. Financial difficulties could never ruffle his feathers, disrespect by lowly relatives was too menial to even grab his attention, illness was never too difficult to conquer; but all of them together were too much even for a man of his stature.

At the time, I was an expert at creating problems, not solving them. I soon realized that a few kicks and punches can send the bad guys out of whack, but that can't fix the damage already done. Initially driven by arrogance and later out of desperation, I virtually wrote a book on how to fail at everything.

Despite having a childhood full of divine experiences, I didn't particularly grow up to be a religious person. I wasn't an atheist but I definitely wasn't someone who would run towards a temple each time I bumped my toe against something (I still don't). I didn't even consider the possibility of a spiritual solution until the day I came across the story of a family whose sole breadwinner was on his deathbed and their continuous chanting of a mantra of goddess Durga for 24 hours straight miraculously saved him.

Twenty four? I'll do forty eight, I thought.

The primary objective of any spiritual practice is to focus every bit of energy that can be harnessed on a single thought with all intensity. Faith in the deity, focus on the goal and a strong sense of responsibility with a lot of enthusiasm makes it all possible.

Battling adaptive barrages of multitude of hideous thoughts, skirting shifting pains and numbness, resisting the temptation to give up; as I inched forward for the first few hours of my 48 hour stint, I realized a massive buildup of an opposing force within me. Chaotic and tumultuous, my mind, though highly receptive and immune to modern day vulnerabilities, is an instinctive wanderer. I've always known my affinity for the dark, I've overstepped my bounds more than I can remember; but, whatever was growing inside of me was beyond the darkness I had experienced before.

Those who are not afraid of the storm, eventually learn to sail right through it. The newfound serenity encouraged my mind to glide towards the new possibilities at the uncharted domain of a different state of consciousness. The soft, tingling vibrations created by the slow, almost inaudible humming of the mantra were randomly traversing different parts of my body. Sometimes, they would reach the base of my spine and send a very enjoyable, sort of chilling shivers upwards towards my brain. Therefore, I diverted all my senses in that direction. A sudden, overwhelming surge of energy bolstered my confidence. Imagining my triumph, savoring the idea of things I would be able to do, I was like a hawk who had just discovered the art of soaring the limitless skies.

Suddenly, everything good came crashing to a halt. A sharp, piercing pain engulfed my senses and, like a wildfire, spread to every cell of my body. I couldn't breathe, I was unable to move and my attempts to open my eyes failed. Even my heart skipped a few beats. I felt as if I was being pulled deeper into an abyss. Gasping for air, I frantically struggled to break free of whatever I had gotten into. Soon, it dawned on me that the force I was up against was much too strong. Even if it was death, I reached out, like a warrior with a sense of honor, to accept it wholeheartedly.

Whatever it was, it was subtle; beyond definition and impossible to express. Wherever I was, if it was a place at all, it was featureless, timeless and beyond my senses. I was afloat, tumbling uncontrollably; and yet, it seemed like I hadn't moved for an eternity. I was everywhere simultaneously and yet, I was nowhere. I don't know who or what I was there, but I was certainly not the one who I used to think I was. I had no beginning and no end. It must have been my existence, if that word really means anything, as a soul.

It was futile to think about time. The past, the present and the future were all there. If there existed anything remotely resembling a desire and if I had it to know, I would have known whatever there had been, whatever there was and whatever there was going to be.

One yet many; the moment I let go of my inhibitions, the moment I accepted all aspects of my existence irrespective of worldly norms, I became the collective consciousness of everything.

When it was time to return, I was back.

I kept going and completed the ritual. My energy level increased considerably as did my confidence. I was pleasantly surprised when the situation started mending itself a few days later. My father recovered. One astrologer, who knew nothing about my ritual, even claimed that I had somehow extended my father's life by a decade.

I returned to the way of life I was born to follow and discovered a whole new universe of possibilities.

A brush with death

Foreknowledge is power. - Auguste Comte

Mantra sadhana (mantra meditation along with several supporting rituals) enables a mind to explore other states of consciousness. While in one of these states, a person can experience some sort of psychic abilities. Some people get so overwhelmed by the clutter of confusing, contradictory emotions that they lose the awareness of these abilities while most others succumb to a worldly negativity and start denying any such possibility. Only a rare few, who possess the necessary clarity, can completely understand their achievements and even they can be susceptible to the ways of the rogue.

The lure of being able to do things not many can do, though misdirected at times, can be a potent motivator. I used to meditate on a mantra of goddess Durga for hours, pushing my limits, drawing new lines, discovering something new each day. The more I practiced, the deeper I could dive. In the process, I dodged many venomous creatures, attracted many more and it wasn't long before I could get to the larger pearls.

One morning, while meditating, I had a vision. I saw garbled phrases in a strange language. Later, I wrote down whatever I could recall. This continued for many days. It looked like the source code for a computer program in a language I did not know. With some effort, I was able to recognize and learn that programming language. I continued working on it, tweaked the program a bit and, some time later, made good money off of it.

Many such incidents later, I once saw myself riding my motorbike on a familiar road. Near a turn, I saw a girl coming from the opposite direction. I was awestruck by her beauty. I even started wondering about the possibility of finding a common friend or something and meeting her so that things could move in the romantically right direction.

That very moment, a truck came out of nowhere and crushed me to death.

The vision was so shockingly realistic, it took me a while to realize that I hadn't actually died. I couldn't shake off the aftereffects of the experience. The surreal pain, the idea of an abrupt ending of my unaccomplished life and the worry about my parents overwhelmed me to the core. I knew, there was no way to prevent it; still, I vowed never to go down that road again.

The vision continued repeating itself with a little more detail each day. In a matter of day, I knew the time of the incident; the make, color and number of the truck; details about the girl's clothes and makeup; and virtually everything around. One day, the vision stopped just as suddenly as it had started.

Time passed by, life took over the thoughts of death and I almost forgot that vision.

I've always believed that whatever happens, happens for a reason. Something as common as fatigue, too, has to have a purpose. That was a day like any other with a slight difference. I was tired, a little less involved than usual in the physical world, roaming the streets on my own accord, I didn't realize

that I had taken a wrong turn towards the forbidden road. I didn't need to have a déjà vu to understand the happenings around me.

"So, this is it", I thought. In a way, I had accepted it and since I had had plenty of time to prepare, I was sure of the best possible outcome. Nobody can cheat death so it was pointless to even try. Things hurriedly moved forward the way they were supposed to and there she was exactly as I had seen her in my vision.

Beauty is to be admired. Amazing beauty, like hers, can make the time slow down. And it did. In the distance, I could hear the roar of a powerful engine - cracking, uneven sound - approaching me at a thundering speed. I could feel my skin collide with the air displaced by a voluminous object. My heart was pounding with all its might, as if it was trying to beat as many times as it would have, had it not been its time to prematurely stop.

Beauty is to die for. I took a deep breath, probably my last, and gazed upon her face one last time. One must think about something very beautiful in their last moments. There was something more beautiful than the girl which I had ignored all along.

Sometimes, it is good not to think. Sometimes, it is better not to worry about consequences. Sometimes, it is best not to follow rules. Sometimes, it is awesome to be riding on a single lane road.

I swerved my motorbike at an insane angle, narrowly missed a few motorbikes coming from the opposite direction and barely avoided hitting a tree on the other side of the road. The truck also took a wild turn and passed right through the spot where I would've been had I not taken that drastic step.

I looked around but couldn't find the girl anywhere. Either she was a figment of my imagination or the goddess had taken that form to save the most beautiful thing there - my life.

Awakening the Serpent

Whatever is considered positive, things that are deemed undesirable; are all forms of energy. - Ashish Marathe

The first logical step in the pursuit of unknown through mantra sadhana is a purashcharan. It is a system of practices and rituals intended to raise one's energy to the level where it becomes spontaneous and inexhaustible. A limitless source of energy is necessary to access the higher states of consciousness.

The way I was performing it, the purashcharan was similar to my normal routine. The overall experience, however, was radically different.

An undisciplined mind is a factory of chaos churning out thoughts embedded into thoughts that morph into other thoughts, which in turn, incite plenty more thoughts. These processes consume precious energy and create psychological blocks that hinder one's spiritual growth. This hindrance reflects on the material world creating a chain reaction of emotional, physical and social turmoil.

Meditation makes the body still, curtails the wayward flow of energies and trains the senses to work in tandem. When a mantra is infused in this process, it controls the wandering mind, abates the thoughts and synchronizes the rising energies in a single stream.

During my purashcharan, each day brought me a new challenge. Hours of meditation resulted in excruciating pain that withered me. I suffered but I held my ground and kept going. After weeks of ignoring the pain, I learned to gain strength from whatever caused the pain by converting it into energy.

Each moment culminated into an ever uglier thought. Vivid and vile, they introduced me to the darkest part of my psyche - a part I never thought I had. I was shaken to the core. My efforts to restrain them were repelled viciously making my mind fertile for even deadlier venoms. Since everything else ended up fueling them, I accepted those thoughts just as I accept the better ones.

Whenever my energy plunged down, I felt like I was being buried alive into the depths of hell. When it surged upwards, the ordeal was similar to a dive into the Sun's corona. My mind devised plots against me, each more sinister than the other, and my body executed them with an unprecedented zeal making my desire to give up stronger than ever. I faced them all with a little more determination and a lot more enthusiasm.

The Aghoris believe that everything is created by Lord Shiva and hence, belongs to Lord Shiva. Whatever belongs to Lord Shiva is Lord Shiva and is, therefore, pure and venerable. This philosophy made my path unobstructed and increased my energy by many folds.

After several traumatic waves of uncertainty, my energy finally began its ascent.

A brisk, somewhat frigid, eerily familiar yet unrecognizable sensation entered my skin and slowly moved towards my heart numbing everything in its path. In a tremulous motion, I was floating in partial weightlessness. I was able to immerse in that disorienting mutation the moment I stopped tugging to my stability. The universe within and the apparent universe without were both being

transformed. All I could hear was a maddening buzz; still, I was hearing way better than I normally would. Blurred and distorted, my vision began fading away. Things were drifting further, disappearing into darkness. Yet somehow, I felt I was seeing the way I never saw before.

Formless and yet, very much aware of my form, I was roaming the boundless expanse. Still connected to the elements of mortality, I was experiencing every aspect of my existence - from infinitesimal to infinite. Thoughts and actions evolved into an autonomous, sentient process. My senses unified to access all the new dimensions. Time slowed down and places converged to a single point. Boundaries dissipated, limits scrunched and my energy level merged with the threshold. At that very moment, as the form was about to disappear into the formless, the energy accumulated at the base of my spine spiked and, violently traversing my spine, irradiated my crown chakra.

I was in a void or I was that vast emptiness. Featureless, formless, timeless - it was beyond existence and even beyond non-existence. It had no origin and no end. It was, perhaps, a precursor of salvation or maybe, the grandest form of the goddess. I still wonder, have I already achieved my ultimate goal.

Joy - sorrow, love - hatred, positive - negative; in that moment, they all seemed indifferent. If I were to spend the eternity somewhere, I'd probably choose that realm of nothingness. As they say, even the perpetual night sees the light of the dawn. In that endless darkness, I noticed a tiny speck of light. Shining far, far away, approaching at an incredible speed; it was a beacon, a reminder that wasn't a random occurrence. I had put it there just before entering the trance. That insignificant dot, by then brighter than the Sun, was going to guide me back to the material world.

Emotions were the first to return. They were stable, laced with a sense of purpose. My hearing had a new dimension. I also realized that my vision was not limited to my physical eyes. All my senses were streamlined, working harmoniously. It felt like each cell of my body had its own power source. When the torrential stream of thoughts was about to flood my mind, something, at the base of my spine, erupted a massive amount of energy.

My root chakra was throbbing violently, sending shockwaves of energy everywhere in my body. Instead of shooting upwards and vanishing at my crown chakra in a flash, the energy kept building up there.

A while later, it gusted to the sacral chakra initiating a downpour of every possible negativity. Enjoying the rhythmic pulsation of both the chakras, I struggled with its outcome. Gradually, the energy brought order to its own chaotic self and continued expanding.

When it spiraled to the solar plexus, I experienced the turiya state - the gateway to a plethora of states of consciousness. At the heart chakra, I immersed into eternal joy. Absolute purity and clarity drenched me at the throat chakra.

When the energy ascended towards my 3rd eye, it had already attained a divine form. I witnessed my whole life - past, present and probable future - in what seemed like a fraction of a second. Several other things were also whisked through my mind, but they were beyond my comprehension.

Then suddenly, the resonance of the chakras, locked in a harmonious synchrony, increased drastically. Bereft of their characteristics, they emptied their entire energy in the crown chakra in a precise outburst. For a split second, I felt as if all the electricity of the universe has been dumped into my head. Everything dissolved into a blinding flash.

Hours later, when I regained control over my senses, I discovered that a misty warmth, after traversing my spine and energizing each of my chakras, was flowing into my brain creating a very pleasant sensation. My Kundalini, the physical aspect of the goddess, also referred to as the Serpent, had awakened.

A tantric experiment

Limitless energy breeds infinite possibilities naturally and supernaturally. - Ashish Marathe

Meditation was never that strangely pleasant. Each of the seven chakras of my kundalini was adding something distinctive to the energy rising from the base of my spine to the crown of my head. A part of me, impervious to the facets of the material universe, was yearning to be liberated. While another, nailed to this world of fears and desires, was preparing to dominate it.

The consciousness harnesses the strength of the body and rises to the highest state so that it may attain moksh. If it is still bound, it reunites with its fleshy incarnation, nourishes it and repeats the cycle.

My energy had crossed the threshold to achieve spontaneity. Whenever it rose, I had no thoughts, no awareness of my existence and thus, no means to use the abundance for the next cycle of my spiritual development. Worldly attributes like desire and purpose do not exist at the highest state of consciousness. I needed an efficient way to link the two incompatible realms.

Tracing that treacherous terrain alone, I didn't have the luxury of accepting favors. Whenever circumstances left me no other choice, I made every effort to return more than I received, preferably in advance. In the search for moksh, even the smallest debt can set you back by decades while repaying greatly accelerates your advancements.

Looking for a resolution, I came across philosophies I couldn't understand, logics that were anything but logical and practices so incomplete and misleading that those practicing them were more clueless than me.

I kept searching. I looked harder, delved deeper and sought farther. After drifting away from the truth for several years, I finally found a multi-dimensional system that reintegrates spiritual energy into worldly processes by modulating desire with a transcending mind. It's called tantra.

I rode long and hard, but could never complete the journey. I flew high with all my might, but always in an uncertain direction. In the middle of that night, while the world slept lessening its tug on me, I sat there alone psyching myself to be able to soar the highest without losing sight of my path.

Wheat flour, which has nourished me for almost all my life, was going to be instrumental in creating a system within a system. After energizing it, I used it to set up a perimeter isolating myself and preventing my energy from dissipating. The perimeter also represented the extra-dimensional boundary between my limited body and limitless soul.

At the center of the perimeter, I sat with an idol of goddess Durga in front of me. The idol consisted of all the aspects of perfection; aspects that I sought to attain moksh. The primary objective of the ritual was to merge some of those aspects with my featureless energy.

In the course of the ritual, I was going to pass through many domains. My success depended on my ability to make some of them converge on the flame of a small lamp and experience them

simultaneously. My consciousness exists in all those domains in different forms. Hence, I needed a weapon to protect myself should I encounter any contentious doppelganger.

Energy, irrespective of form and circumstance, rises instinctively. It is not bound by the laws of time and space. The more the build up, the fiercer and turbulent it becomes. My energy sprung into action even before I could complete the mundane yet meaningful ritual to worship the goddess. It transformed itself by bouncing back and forth between me and the idol. Amid the complex interplay of corporeal and non-corporeal, it assimilated the quintessence of the earthly elements of the ritual from different realities. The barriers between the inner and the outer collapsed and I was flung towards the zenith.

It was a confluence of existence and non-existence, a gateway to diverse possibilities. Each was subtly different than the other, each a little out of phase with the other. While experiencing the metaphysical pinball, I realized, I had the option to choose. I could have chosen wisely or I could have allowed myself to be scurried towards an apparent oblivion. Or I could have followed a rare trait and had handed the reigns over to chance.

I also became aware of the presence of an invisible observer. I no longer needed a choice.

Energy that was matter before was matter again. The bliss at the break of the dawn signified the subtlety of the change. I had retained a tiny fraction of the knowledge accessible only at the highest state of consciousness. A new understanding refined my attributes making me better aware of myself - physically and spiritually. Goals that seemed implausible the earlier night had acquired a degree of attainability.

Tantra is a natural process that relies on the perfect balance of its constituents. It instills a touch of materialistic impulse into an absolutely spiritual process giving rise to love, strength, and knowledge; and also to lust, rage and madness.

A tantric ode to goddess Durga

Luck favors those who don't wait for something to happen automatically. - Ashish Marathe

I am an ocean of possibilities. Like everyone else in this universe, I am full of magnificent nectars and dreaded poisons. Beyond the reach of imagination, I am a lot more than the turbulent sum of my wayward parts. I seek the circumstances necessary to churn myself to reveal my riches.

Navratri, a Hindu festival dedicated to the worship of goddess Durga, presents me that opportunity.

This tantric endeavor begins with a 21 day purification process.

I am immortal. Unlike the fragile bodies I keep shedding, I preserve my experiences. Some of them keep me bound to this world and prevent me from attaining moksh, while some drag me towards the divine. This conflict dampens my inherent nature and exposes my physical incarnation to jeopardy. I seek to discipline my unruly tides by harmonizing all my manifestations.

The purification process prepares me for the 9 nights of navratri.

I am free from the clutches of time. There are no dimensions to my expansion. My contraction is beyond senses. I can create because I was never created. Nothing can destroy me, hence I must destroy everything. I am primal. I seek the darkness of goddess Kali.

I exist everywhere although I exist nowhere. I am formless and yet, I span several forms. The elements are my reflections, the dimensions are the echoes of my whispers. I nurture, I nourish. I seek the abundance of goddess Lakshmi.

I am the past, the present and the future. I experience every moment from all possible perspectives. Everything is my manifestation. I know everything there is to know, and therefore, I know, there is nothing to know. I seek the knowledge of goddess Saraswati.

I am one. During the 9 nights of navratri, I seek to embrace the oneness of goddess Kali, goddess Lakshmi and goddess Saraswati.

I am the beginning hidden in the depths of the Mooladhar, I am the middle that governs every aspect of this world and I am the end that enlightens the Sahasrar. I am the essence of the journey of seven steps.

In the next 7 days, I experience the flow of energy in all chakras of my Kundalini. I realign myself with my new life in another 5 days.

The journey from the trenches of sorrow to the summit of unconditional joy doesn't need to be a lifelong pilgrimage. It is possible to cross all hurdles, mend everything that is broken, nurse each wound and quench insatiable thirsts with the right combination of wisdom, effort and time.

Come, let us worship goddess Durga in the tantric tradition together.

DISCLAIMER: By participating in this event, you agree to indemnify and hold harmless me or anyone associated with this event from any and all claims or damages.

To participate in the event, email the following to ashish.marathe@yahoo.com

Name:

Address:

Date, place and time of birth:

Nationality:

Gender:

Religion:

Spiritual experiences, if any:

Please, include a valid photographic proof of identity.

Kindly, note that this is NOT a free event.

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